

Honor of Thieves

By Clare Thornton.

The thief had been a trifle surprised to find the door of the room unlocked; but his surprise amounted to momentary stupefaction when, having entered stealthily, he found himself looking into the terrified eyes of a woman. She was on her knees by an open safe, and the light of the candle she had placed on a chair beside her showed him the ivory loveliness of her face, framed in its streaming hair.

When she saw him she let fall a little chamois leather bag which she had just taken from the safe and clasped both hands to her breast.

"Jim!" she gasped. "Jim!"

The thief recovered his self-control at once, and coming forward, seated himself in an armchair opposite to her and surveyed her with some amusement.

"This is a surprise party, ma chérie!" he said, lightly, with a gay smile that went well with his daredevil eyes and bold, sharply-cut features. "I did not know you had taken to felonious practices. But—by Jove, how the deuce—" and he arched his eyebrows and gave a low whistle of astonishment as he gazed at the complicated machinery of the massive safe door. She rose from her knees and confronted him; a slim, girlish figure in her soft dressing gown, trembling from head to foot, white-lipped and ashen-faced.

"I knew how to open it," she faltered. "I hid in here one day and watched Lord Mordon do it. Oh, Jim, for heaven's sake go, or we shall be heard! Why did I do it? Oh, why did I do it?"

A cynical smile played about the thief's clean-shaven lip.

"Oh, I'm awfully in debt!" she declared vehemently. "Indeed, it's terrible! I've sold my diamonds long ago; the things I wear are wretched imitations. And I've been losing money at bridge, and—horse racing. Oh, Jim, be generous and go! Lord Mordon's bedroom is just above us and he will hear us! Oh, I would kill myself rather than be caught! For the sake of old times, Jim!"

The thief settled himself more comfortably in the chair and stretched his muscular arms languidly.

"Old times, eh?" he said, stifling a yawn. "Dear me, how melodramatic we are! Do you mean to tell me you ever think of those old times?"

Her white lips were trembling pitifully. "I would give the whole world to undo the past!" she said passionately; "if it is any satisfaction to you to know that. Oh, how cruel you are to torture me so! It isn't like you—as you used to be, Jim!"

He laughed grimly. "I am not as I used to be; thanks to you!" he said bitterly; then rising and speaking more briskly, "but, of course, I'm going. I was only teasing you. There is honor among members of my—I beg your pardon—our profession, and this is clearly your show. But how in the name of all that's wonderful do you intend to dispose of the thing?"

A nervous smile twitched her colorless lips. "I have friends—" she began, then

stopped, her face flaming and paling by turns. "Oh, I heard someone coming! Jim, Jim, what shall I do?"

They both stood listening; she with tense face and parted lips, he in a bored, uninterested way that bespoke nerves of steel. She ran to his side and clung to him, tremulous and hysterical. The touch of her clinging hands, the contact of her soft draperies and softer, faintly perfumed hair, conjured up a host of bitter-sweet memories that the thief had long ago considered dead and buried; and for an instant the candlelight shone upon a sudden moisture in his eyes. But it was clearly no moment for sentiment, and already his resourceful brain had mapped out the course of action he meant to follow. He knew that escape was impossible, but he knew that there was only one thing for him to do. He took the bag gently from her unresisting fingers, thrust it into an inner pocket, and sprang away from her toward the open door. That which he had known to be inevitable took place. The room elicited suddenly into a dazzling brilliance and he found himself blinking into the barrel of a revolver. He had little difficulty in recognizing the tall, blonde, pajama-clad lever of the revolver as Lord Mordon, whose portrait he had frequently seen in the illustrated papers.

"Hands up," said that young gentleman, quietly, for the thief's hands had shot instantly and instinctively to the bulging side pocket of his overcoat. "That's it!" as he was smilingly obeyed. "Now—but—great Scott!"

His eyes had fallen upon the woman, who had staggered down upon a chair and was regarding the thief with wide, bewildered eyes.

"Mrs. Wytham," he gasped; "what ever—"

The thief's eyes telegraphed their urgent message to her, and the thief himself addressed his captor.

"The lady interrupted me," he said blandly; "I was threatening her with my shooter as you arrived, intending to tie her up and make tracks."

The woman had roused herself with an effort, and the color was coming slowly back to her face.

"I came down for my book," she said to Lord Mordon. "I couldn't sleep, and thought I would read. Oh, Archie, it was awful! He threatened to shoot me if I made any noise, and I was so terrified! What could I do?"

"Mrs. Wytham," said Lord Mordon, "will you kindly go into the hall and telephone down to the police station? They'll send up a couple of men in ten minutes or so."

Mrs. Wytham got up.

"Oh, I don't know how to telephone, Archie," she said. "I've never done it before. But can't I stay here while you go? You can give me his pistol if you like, but I'm sure he's not going to be any trouble. If he is—well, you know what a good shot I am."

But as soon as Lord Mordon's broad shoulders had disappeared through the doorway into the dark hall beyond his mobile face resumed its normal expression of blasé audacity. Mrs. Wytham, who had divined his swiftly conceived plan with true feminine intuition, thrust the revolver into his hands.

"Through the window, quick!" she whispered. "I'll know what to say to him when he comes back. Oh, quick, quick for heaven's sake!"

He laughed softly, with shining eyes, kissed his hand to her, and ran swiftly across the lawn that lay smooth and blanched in the light of the full moon. She waited a moment or two, then, having cleverly imitated the sounds of a scuffle—stamping and pushing the chairs about in a manner sufficiently grotesque to warrant a verdict of lunacy from any chance beholder—she rushed to the door, almost falling into the arms of Lord Mordon.

"Oh, he's gone!" she cried. "I was not looking at him, and he sprang at me and wrenched the revolver out of my hands. Oh, how awful it is! He looked so broken and miserable, I thought he was safe!"

"Dash it, yes!" said Lord Mordon viciously, repressing a stronger explosive. "I thought so, too! I'm going after him; he's probably got his pockets stuffed with notes. Rouse the house, Mrs. Wytham, and send the other fellow after me. Which way did he go?"

But the house was soon roused more effectively than by any screams of hers. The sharp crack of a revolver shot broke upon a momentary lull in the gale, followed by another, then the din of the driving wind swallowed up all sounds for a while. Mrs. Wytham crouched on her chair, shivering and sobbing. She had misdirected Lord Mordon; but it appeared that she had done so to no purpose.

Two days before Lord Mordon had asked her to marry him, and she had told him very gently and sweetly that she could never be more than a friend to him, she had always supposed, as the world supposed, that her husband was dead, and this was the death blow to a hundred pathetic hopes. Then, kneeling there with that white, upturned face upon her knee, and the dark tress murmuring about them—an admirable mis-en-scène of which she was completely unconscious—she told him her story—from that miserable day six years before, when in a frenzy of unreasoning rage she had sent her husband (innocent as she soon knew, of that which she had laid to his charge) away from her forever, to the shameful record of her share in that evening's happenings.

When the thief opened his eyes he was lying in a cool white bed in a room wherein the lights were softly shaded. He could remember nothing, and when he tried to sit up and look about him a sharp pain stabbed his side, and turning his head, looked into the kindly eyes of Lord Mordon, who was sitting beside the bed.

"An explanation of affairs would greatly oblige," he said languidly, glancing round the luxurious room: "is this an improved Wormwood Scrubbs, run by your lordship as a society flat?"

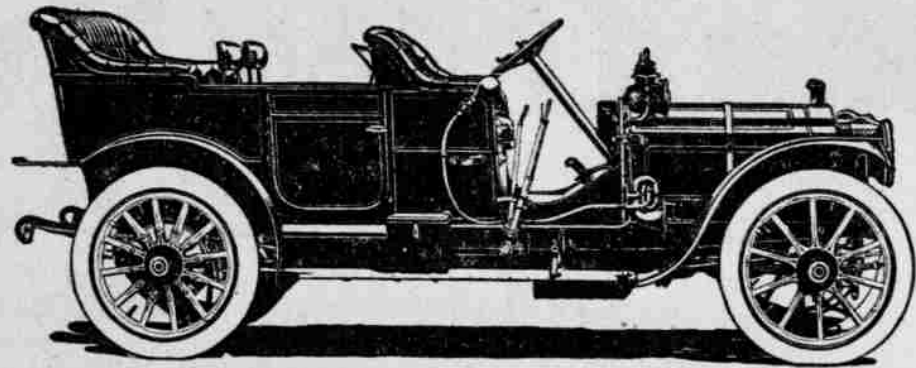
In which case, will you be so kind as to summon my valet to bring me some breakfast? I'm hungry and—

The whimsical voice ceased abruptly. Lord Mordon had leaned forward

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and the light shone on his haggard face. "Mrs. Wytham has told me everything," he said quietly; "will you shake hands?"

The thief did not move, and his cynical smile crept back to his lips.

"Then she cannot have told you everything," he said bitterly; "men like you do not want to shake hands with professional thieves."

"Rot!" said the young fellow, bluntly; "as if I cared, after tonight!"

So they clasped hands, and the thief's face flushed strangely. Then Lord Mordon rose.

"I'm going to send her to you," he said; "and look here, she wants you to take her away with you, to one of the colonies. I have a large farm in Manitoba, and I want a manager for it. If you will take the place I will be—very pleased."

His boyish face was crimson, and he avoided the thief's eyes. The thief lay very still for a few seconds; then he spoke. Perhaps it was from weakness that his voice was unsteady.

"You make me think there must be a few decent fellows in the world! I did not think there were any thieves! Of course, I'll take the place! But I don't know what to say; how to thank you. Perhaps I'd better know better!"

At that the other laughed harshly, and comprehension dawned in the thief's plying eyes.

"No!" said Lord Mordon quickly; "I will not let her thank me. I have borne enough without that!" and he went out of the room.

A few seconds later the thief, known to a large circle of friends six years before as James Barrington Wytham, was looking into his wife's tear-stained face.



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